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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

NEWS

Office for Media Relations
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

U.S. BISHOPS EXPRESS SOLIDARITY WITH EAST TIMOR CHURCH

WASHINGTON--In a statement of solidarity with the Church and people of East Timor, Bishop Daniel P. Reilly, Bishop of Norwich and Chairman, Committee on International Policy, United States Catholic Conference (USCC), expressed USCC concern at the continuing difficulties experienced by Catholics there, and urged "more vigorous action" by the United Nations to help settle the island's disputed political status. East Timor was invaded and annexed by Indonesia in 1975, after Portugal ceded its colonial control.

In recent weeks, incidents involving desecration of the Eucharist and harassing of nuns by Indonesian soldiers have heightened tensions between the largely Muslim occupying forces and the overwhelmingly Catholic population. East Timor Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo has said the area is becoming "a hell...where Christians are constantly being arrested, beaten and intimidated by police" and where a policy of imposing Islam seems to be occurring.

Citing the hope expressed by Pope John Paul II last year that new talks on the future of East Timor might promote the cultural and religious rights of the people there, Bishop Reilly called on Catholics "to pray for the well-being of our Timorese brothers and sisters, that they may continue to grow in their rich cultural and religious traditions, free of outside pressure and coercion."

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In Indonesia proper, religious tension is less of an issue where 85 percent of the 185 million people are Moslems and the constitution guarantees freedom of worship. Cardinal Francis Arinze, President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, met with President Suharto today and told reporters "there are many religions in the world. If they cooperate in mutual harmony, listen and face challenges together they can do much good."

The text of Bishop Reilly's statement is attached.

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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

Department of Social Development and World Peace

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STATEMENT ON EAST TIMOR

Small nations oppressed by larger neighbors often draw sympathetic responses from the world community, but seldom has a population as small, and as distant from us, as East Timor held our attention as that tiny community continues to do. A population of some 650,000 Timorese has, for almost twenty years, lived under the control, and the abusive, harsh and often violent treatment, of their Indonesian military overseers.

These people have survived the brutal invasion of December 7, 1975 and the subsequent policies which have been described by serious observers as nearly genocidal. More than 100,000 people--some estimates are much higher--perished in the early years as a direct result of Indonesian military rule. The massacre of unarmed and non-violent demonstrators at the Santa Cruz cemetery on November 12, 1991, captured in horrifying detail on film by a foreign filmmaker, is now etched in the consciousness of many. Repressive policies and actions directed especially against the young people of East Timor, and often against the Catholic church there, are a continuing reality.

We admire the people of East Timor for their bravery, their suffering and their determination to preserve their culture against overwhelming odds, but we also feel the special bond with them that comes from our shared Catholic faith. The Church of East Timor, led by Bishop Carlos Ximenes Belo,S.D.B., has become a source of hope and encouragement for all the people. It is instructive to note that, during the 400 years of Portuguese colonial rule, Catholics remained a relatively small minority among the largely animist population, whereas today over 90% of all East Timor is now Catholic. It is surely a testament to the fidelity of that local church to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and to the church's commitment to the defense of human rights and the dignity of every person.

East Timor continues to pose a political challenge to the community of nations. It presents a set of conflicting interests and rights not unlike other situations in the world today. Some of these areas of conflict, as in South Africa, the Middle East, and Central America, have witnessed extraordinary breakthroughs in just the last years; others, as in the Balkans and parts of Africa, remain apparently intractable. East Timor, it seems to us, represents a far less thorny problem than many others; it is a problem that can and should be solved.

The mechanism that is already in place, namely the ministerial meetings between the governments of Indonesia and Portugal under the auspices of the United Nations, is the appropriate vehicle to advance the negotiations. Ever since 1983, the U.N. Secretary General has been entrusted with the task of finding a settlement to the dispute. The recent meetings, held in Rome and New York last year and in Geneva this May, thus far without participation of Timorese representatives, appear not to be moved by a sense of urgency. It seems appropriate for the Secretary General to press for more vigorous action to come from these meetings, and we urge him to do so.

The United States and Indonesia are very important partners of one another. We recognize that our government has made a number of useful overtures to Jakarta concerning East Timor, for which we are grateful. We urge, however, that new initiatives be undertaken, to encourage both the resolution of the political crisis and full compliance on issues of human rights.

We recognize that differing proposals for resolving the region's status may exist among the people, some apparently favoring annexation, others full independence, and the rest calling for a process that would eventually lead to a referendum determining the relationship. Prior to any political resolution, however, all can agree that there must be an end to the kind of political and even religious persecution and violation of human rights that continue to plague that tortured community.

A year ago, Pope John Paul II expressed to the Indonesian foreign minister his wish that new talks on the future of East Timor might promote "the well-being of that people in respect of their rights and cultural and religious traditions." We invite our Catholic people to pray for the well-being of our Timorese brothers and sisters, that they may continue to grow in their rich cultural and religious traditions, free of outside pressures and coercion. And we express our fraternal solidarity with Bishop Belo and all the church of Dili, asking God's blessing on their ministry to the people of East Timor.

Bishop Daniel P. Reilly, Chairman
Committee on International Policy
United States Catholic Confeerence

July 26, 1994